

Twelve Days of Christmas: A July, July Story by Iris Violetta

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Summary: Snippets of 12 Christmases over the years. Takes place in the same universe as July, July.

1. 1982

1982

On Christmas morning, Holly is up at the crack of dawn and immediately wakes each member of her family. Mike jumps up eagerly, Ted and Karen are slower to get up and Nancy smashes her face into her pillow and begs to sleep longer. Holly is two and a half and it's the first time she has any understanding of the holiday. Two hours later, wrapping paper litters the living room floor and Karen serves fresh cinnamon rolls before they dress for church.

Lucas' father has always been an early riser, leftover from his military days, but he lets his family sleep a little longer while he makes coffee. He's still full from his wife's fantastic Christmas Eve feast. Not long after he sits with his steaming mug, there's a padding of small feet in the hall and Lucas pokes his head into the kitchen. There's a hopeful look in his eyes and his dad chuckles.

"Go on, go get your mother so we can see what Santa brought." Lucas is up the stairs in a flash.

Dustin's house is a frenzy of siblings and cousins and grandparents and other relatives. Everyone talks over each other and wrapping paper is flying everywhere. His aunts make breakfast casserole and his grandpa plays Christmas songs on the piano and all the kids sing along, most of them off-key. Dustin carves out a space for himself in the corner and sings between bites of candy from his stocking.

Jonathan wakes first and makes a special breakfast of eggs and pancakes and their holiday splurge of bacon. The smell wakes Joyce, still yawning from the busy Christmas Eve shift. Will is the last to emerge, but he bursts from his room excitedly to inspect the boxes under the tree. Joyce lets him look through his stocking but he has to have breakfast before any presents. She's feeling weary and worn from the long year, but her heart warms as she sits with her two boys.

Santa brings each boy a Supercomm and they almost believe in him again (somehow it's more believable for him to exist than for their

parents to have all coordinated on gifts). They spend the afternoon trying to contact each other, alternating between phone calls ("ok, try channel six this time") and the radios ("Lucas, Lucas, come in"). Will, still able to wander on his own at this point, slowly walks along Mirkwood, testing the connection every few steps as he passes Hawkins Lab.

Behind the fence and deep in the building, Project 011 proceeds as usual, although she notices there are fewer scientists here today. She thinks about asking Papa why, but decides it's safer to keep quiet.

2. 1985

1985

Christmas of '85 is one of Eleven's favorites. Last year she hadn't known what to expect and she often felt behind everyone else. But she had still loved it and this year she's been looking forward to it since August. The weeks leading up to Christmas are often better than the day itself and now that she's a holiday veteran, she can fully enjoy them.

The Hawkins Christmas parade takes place on the first Saturday of December every year. The Byers didn't attend last year, as El was still very skittish around crowds. But she's grown so much over the past several months and asks if they can go this year. And that's how she finds herself sitting on a curb along Main Street, squished between Will and Mike. Hopper and Joyce stand behind them, Brian swallowed up in a bundle of layers in her arms. Karen and Ted stand beside them, Karen pouring cocoa from the thermos she brought. Holly alternates between sitting by her brother and hopping up and down, excited to see Santa. Nancy and Jonathan disappeared almost an hour ago.

El feels happy to be here with her favorite people. This Christmas she feels like an actual part of the family, not just a stray they took in. She has more things now that are just hers: a navy coat, thick scarf, yellow beret perched on her head. Her boots are a hand-me-down from Nancy but they still keep her warm. Her nose is practically white and her breath appears as tendrils in the air and it's all Mike can do to keep from kissing her right there. But he can feel the chief's eyes on his back and contents himself with rubbing her nose, earning himself a giggle.

Then they hear the sound of the high school marching band leading the parade and it's started. Both Lucas and Dustin are in the parade this year, the former in band and the latter in drama club. Lucas has been nervous about the performance but Dustin has been excitedly talking about it for weeks.

When they catch sight of their friends rounding the corner, they

cheer and El lifts up the sign she made for them. She used a whole tube of glitter on it, some of the sparkles now falling down onto Mike's hat. Lucas flicks his eyes at them but continues to play his trumpet in tune with the rest. The drama club walks after the band, dressed in their costumes from the upcoming production of A Christmas Carol. Dustin's curls stick out under a raggedy top hat and he smirks at his friends as he passes, reaching a hand down for high fives. Jennifer Hayes is also in the drama club and waves to Will with a blush as she passes. El can feel his cringe next to her but he waves back politely.

Several local businesses have built floats and El recognizes some of the people from around town. Steve stands on the float for the grocery store he works at, beaming and waving at the crowd. Nancy and Jonathan have returned in time for him, Jonathan making sure to snap a few photos.

Then the final float comes into sight, a large red sleigh and the man of the hour atop it. Holly jumps up and yells, "Santa! Santa!" Hopper bites the inside of his cheek, thinking of how until a few years ago Benny Hammond always played Santa.

After the parade ends, they all go to the Wheeler's for treats (and drinks for the adults). A Charlie Brown Christmas is playing on tv and the kids gather in the living room with their steaming mugs of cocoa. El made Mike help her bake cookies earlier that day, gingerbread in various holiday shapes, little snowflakes and reindeers and bells. They eat the cookies on the couch, the only lights the flicker of the fireplace, the twinkling of the Christmas tree and the glow of the television. El feels cozy and warm and loved; December is going to be a great month.

3. 1986

1986

The Nutcracker has been a Wheeler women tradition since 1972. Every year Karen takes her daughters to Bloomington for the ballet and this year she decides to invite Eleven as well.

In typical Karen fashion, El receives a handwritten invitation in the mail right before Thanksgiving. The card has a pretty Christmas scene on the front and El pins it to her wall next to Will's drawing and photos of the boys.

Nancy is home from school for the month and takes her shopping for an outfit, explaining that one should always dress up for the theater. El likes that idea, but she likes the idea of spending time with Nancy better. The girl stayed out at Stanford the past summer, working and taking extra classes, and El missed her. They pick through the dresses at the local department store and she asks Nancy about ballet, as the boys were less than helpful on that topic ("It's boring and weird and for girls.")

"You'll like it. The Nutcracker is a Christmas classic. I always dreamed that I would be in it. Oh, I used to take ballet classes," she explains when she sees the confusion on El's face.

"When?"

"Well, I started when I was five and that's when my mom first took me to see the Nutcracker. And then every year until I started high school." She looks wistfully at the dresses on the hangers and, without realizing it, grabs her necklace with one hand. El notices, sees that she looks a bit sad.

"Why did you stop?"

Nancy flutters her hand dismissively, a habit she picked up from Karen. It would mortify her but she doesn't realize she does it. "Oh, it took up too much time and I had to concentrate on schoolwork. And Barb didn't take it so I wanted to spend more time with her."

"Why didn't you dance in the Nutcracker?"

Nancy lets out a short laugh. "I took dance at Miss Cindy's in Hawkins. She never has enough people for a real ballet, just recitals. The Bloomington Ballet Company is much larger. Here, what about this one? I think it would be perfect," she says as she places a dress in El's arms. The younger girl nods enthusiastically.

A week later Joyce drops her off at the Wheeler house and Mike answers the door. She's there on the stoop in a black velvet dress and a red satin bow, pretty as a Christmas gift. His mouth opens slightly but he's blanking on any words so she merely kisses him with a blush before pushing him back into the house. His reverie is interrupted by Holly who tromps down the stairs in her green tartan dress, begging El to come up and do her hair. She likes El's braids best of all. Eleven laughs and follows her upstairs.

Holly is in ballet herself now and she spends the car ride telling them all about her classes. There's no one more serious than a six-year-old discussing ballet.

The theater is old and ornate and all done up for the holidays. El studies her program as she settles into her seat between Nancy and Holly. The little girl sits on a folded coat for a better view of the stage, anxiously craning her head while they wait for the show to start. Then the lights dim and the curtains open and goosebumps appear on El's arms. She loves it. The lights, the colors, the grace of it all. They move like water, bend like grass to sun, float as if flying. After it's over and the bows have all been taken, El is already looking forward to next year's performance.

The drive home is quiet, just the soft sounds of Christmas music from the radio. Holly falls asleep against her in the backseat. El places an arm around her and watches the light from passing street lamps flicker on her hair. Nancy leans her head against the passenger window and looks at the various decorations they pass. Karen peeks at them all every so often, wearing a tiny smile the whole time.

4. 1988

1988

How many boys does it take to chop down a Christmas tree? Six. It takes six.

Hopper breaks his arm this year and Will plans to surprise him with the perfect Christmas tree. The chief has taken care of the tree for years now, usually going to the tree farm a few towns over, where he swears the trees are "fresher." Will decides to do him one better and get the freshest tree possible, straight from the woods.

Will recruits Jonathan, who recruits Steve, who tells Nancy, who tells Mike, who decides he and Lucas and Dustin would be a helpful addition to the team. No one tells Eleven because they're hoping to do it themselves, "as men."

They gather at the edge of Mirkwood on a clear Saturday. It had snowed the past few days and fresh powder covers everything. Will is standing there holding the ax when Jonathan and Steve arrive, the latter wrinkling his nose.

"Is that the ax we used on that... thing?"

Jonathan good-naturedly rolls his eyes before replying, "We cleaned it, ok?"

They're interrupted by the screeching of Dustin's car as it pulls up. The three boys tumble out of the vehicle, arms laden with goods. Lucas brought his dad's saw and Mike is holding a large coil of twine. Dustin has a thermos of cocoa and -

"Dustin, is that a golf club?"

"Yeah."

"Why?"

"In case we run into a bear."

Steve scoffs. "What are you gonna do, Henderson, caddy for it?"

Lucas looks triumphant as he exclaims, "I told you!"

"Ok, ok, geez," Dustin grumbles as he tosses the club back into his car. He and Lucas bicker as they follow the others into the woods, only ending when Dustin shoves Lucas into a snow bank. Will puts on his sternest face and tells them to behave if they're going to be there. "Especially since you all invited yourselves," he adds with a look at Mike. The latter shrugs defensively but says nothing.

After considering several options - too tall, too scraggly, too lopsided, too brown, too Charlie-Brown - they find the one. They all stand around it, looking almost in awe.

"Yep, this is it," Will softly says, smile growing on his face. Jonathan hands him the ax with a grin.

"You can have the first go."

Will takes his time lining up a good swing, while Dustin murmurs, "Hey batter batter, swing, batter batter." The ax enters the tree with a satisfying "thwack" but Will can't get it back out. Jonathan takes over for a few hits before handing off to Lucas. The latter lifts the ax but pauses, looking up in confusion.

"Lucas, what is it?"

"Did... did Dustin fart?"

"Shut UP Sinclair!" Dustin yells and Mike has the foresight to grab the ax before Dustin tackles Lucas. His own turn with the tool is only mildly successful and they all decide to switch to the saw. It's slow going but after a while the tree starts to teeter.

"I got it! I got it!" Steve yells as the tree topples over with a loud thump. The others look at each other with wild eyes.

"Steve?"

"Ow." Comes the reply, muffled under the branches.

The boys manage to pull the tree over and find Steve in the snow, face contorted in pain. Jonathan bends to a squat and leans his face close. "Are you ok?"

"Uhh...not sure. I think I dislocated my shoulder."

"Are you serious? How do you know?"

"I did it once before, as a kid. Felt a lot like this."

Jonathan knits his brow in sympathy. "It's ok, we'll get you back to town, to a doctor."

"Also my ankle..."

Dustin grabs at his hat in exasperation. "Well, shit, how are we supposed to get the tree AND Steve back?"

They all begin to talk at once, like chickens clucking in a coop.

"Dustin, are you seriously that selfish?"

"Well what if we..."

"I'll go back and grab my sled!"

"What if we all dislocate our shoulders?"

"Guys, we're not leaving Steve here."

"But the tree -"

"No, it's ok, just leave me here to die."

"We could tie Steve to the tree -"

"What are you doing?"

That last one is definitely in a female voice and they all jump and turn to see El standing a few yards away, wrapped up in a heavy coat, face barely visible between hat and scarf.

"Uhh..." Dustin drones, blanking on what to say.

"We're getting a tree," Will pipes up. "For Hop."

Mike takes a step forward and adds, "I told them that we should bring you."

Lucas doesn't even try to hide his incredulous look. "No, you didn't!"

Mike shake his head and mouths to her, "He's lying." She ignores him and looks over at Steve lying in the snow.

"What's wrong with him?"

"We think he dislocated his shoulder."

"No, I know it's dislocated," Steve insists.

El simply looks at him and the rest hear a sickening crack. They panic for a moment - does El even know how to set a shoulder? - but Steve's face relaxes a bit and they all sigh in relief. Jonathan gently mentions that a doctor should take care of his ankle. He and Lucas manage to lift Steve up and he stands on his good ankle, leaning against them.

El looks back at them with a look of loving exasperation (Mike thinks she learned this from Nancy). "Well, should we take it to Hop?"

How many girls does it take to bring home a Christmas tree? One. It takes one telekinetic girl.